

Rabbinic Literature

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Today we are going to be discussing who the rabbis were and what rabbinic literature is.

The earliest known use of rabbi dates back before 100 CE and it was used as an honorific title or mode of address referencing wealthy Jewish men and was equivalent to people today referring to men as “sir”. In its original context it had no connection to teaching or teachers (Lapin, 1992, 7297). After the first century, rabbi began to be used to reference the master of a slave or a teacher. This shift in the meaning of the word came in part from the way it was used in rabbinic literature and how it was interpreted in the New Testament. In Matthew, the term was used to mean both sir and teacher (Lapin, 1992, 7298).

In rabbinic literature, rabbi began to be used as a special designation for a teacher. The shift from “sir” to “teacher” reflected in rabbinic literature left traces in the New Testament because Jesus was often referred to as rabbi and he was heavily associated with teaching (Lapin, 1992, 7299).

Rabbinic literature is writings by and about Jewish teachers dated from the 2nd century and later. Its focus was on cultural and legal questions and its purpose was to fill in gaps in knowledge left by earlier Jewish writings such as the Torah (Saldarini, 1992, 7299). It was used to interpret the New Testament because of the time it was written about and because it contained insight to Jewish cultural and legal practices not found in other literature. Some examples of rabbinic literature are the Mishnah, the Tosefta, the Babylonian Talmud, and the Jerusalem Talmud.

The Mishnah is considered part of the Jewish oral law. For the first 600 years of its existence it was passed down orally (Ilan, 2020, 2:385). It was seen as the second part of Jewish law in addition to the Torah (Ilan, 2020, 2:383) and it was created to fill in loopholes in the Torah. It was not a new law code. This is because it was believed that the laws were already being passed down through oral tradition. The Mishnah was divided into six sedarim: Zera'im (seeds), Mo'ed (festival), Našim (women), Neziqin (damages), Qodasim

(holies), and Toharot (purities). It was believed that these six sedarim covered everything in a Jew's life (Ilan, 2020, 2:384). Commentary on the Mishnah could be found in the Tosefta, the Bavli, and the Yerushalmi.

The Tosefta is a written collection of Jewish traditions meant as a supplement or addition to the Mishnah (Tilly, 2020, 2:538). It includes oral traditions not incorporated into the Mishnah which were gathered to prevent them from being forgotten. Like the Mishnah, the Tosefta is divided into six sedarim and it contains similar information to the Mishnah (Tilly, 2020, 2:539). The Tosefta cites the Mishnah and then the Tosefta is cited by Bavli and Yerushalmi.

The Jerusalem Talmud, known as the Yerushalmi, is a commentary on the Mishnah. However, it does not include Qodasim and Toharot most likely because without the temple, sacrifices and many purities rituals were no longer relevant (Stemberger, 2020, 2:519). The Babylonian Talmud, known as the Bavli, is also a commentary on the Mishnah but it does not include commentary on Zera'im or Toharot (Rubenstein, 2020, 2:516). There is no Zera'im because those laws were only applicable in the agricultural setting of Israel not Babylonia. There is no Toharot because without the temple most purity rituals were irrelevant (Ilan, 2020, 2:385).

Some influential figures in rabbinic literature were Akiva, Hillel, and Shammai. Akiva was the leading rabbinic sage of antiquity and the most influential figure in developing halakah, which are legal traditions, following the destruction of the temple in 70 CE (Ben-Shahar, 2020, 2:12). He brought the method of constructing halakah through midrashic interpretation to its peak. This allowed sages to create laws about all areas of life based on scriptural texts (Ben-Shahar, 2020, 2:12). It also allowed the sages to adapt the Torah to changing circumstances. The Mishnah is based largely off of Akiva and his student's compilations. Hillel and Shammai are notable as they were considered the last pair of scholars. They each represent a tendency in halakic development. For example, Shammai believed in a stricter, more literal interpretation of the law whereas Hillel was more lenient (Stemberger, 2020, 2:341).

To understand rabbinic literature it must first be read in the historical, social, and religious context in which it was written. The reader must also be familiar with Jewish laws, culture, and history. This is because the writings do not give an overview of the subject matter. They discuss gaps in Jewish writings with the understanding that the reader is very familiar with what the writings are discussing (Saldarini, 1992, 7300).

Thank you for listening to this presentation and I hope you now have a better understanding of the history of rabbis and what rabbinic literature is.

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